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ON PAGE 1-B

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Presidential point man for Contras

By Diana West
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When Elliott Abrams was an undergrad at Harvard, he and his roommate used to fight about the Vietnam War.

"We used to fight about it all the time," recalls former roommate Dan Hastings, "because I was for it, and he was against it."

Elliott Abrams? Lightning rod of liberal wrath, lodestar of conservative foreign policy, the persuasive point man for Ronald Reagan's Central American strategy, was against the Vietnam War?

"Don't get me wrong," adds Mr. Hastings, now a lawyer in New York. "He was never a radical." He pauses. "I'm just glad someone with that much ability became a conservative."

But not so fast.

A left-leaning twist of a smile appears on Elliott Abrams' face as he sits on a sofa in his sunny State Department office.

"Do you know I was the National Chairman of the Campus ADA [Americans for Democratic Action]? Following in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan himself?" he adds, finding wry pleasure in his words.

That was 1968, "an interesting period," recalls Mr. Abrams, 38, dressed in his Saturday best — khakis and sneakers and athletic socks fallen about his ankles.

"You have this split: Johnson was president, you have this thing about the war, and you have Humphrey. Now, I was for Humphrey, but I was sort of dis-elected because ADA was backing McCarthy."

"That was when ADA really made its turn left, and that was the beginning of the split in the Democratic Party. Ultimately," he explains, looking out from under bushy eyebrows, "you had McGovern in '72 and the formulation of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority."

(Rattling off a list of the early members of CDM, a group designed to regain control of the Democratic Party for centrists, Mr. Abrams mentions Jeane Kirkpatrick, Ben Wattenberg, the late Sen. Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, and Reps. Jim Wright and Tom Foley — neatly omitting his own mother- and father-in-law, Midge Decter and Norman Podhoretz, founding members of CDM.)

In 1969, the Great Student Strike swept the Harvard campus, as the SDS occupied University Hall and attempted to shut down the campus by persuading people not to go to class.

"The experience of the student revolt affected him," says Mr. Hastings. "In my judgment, it moved him to the right."

So Elliott Abrams became one of the founders of The Ad Hoc Committee to Keep Harvard Open. "I still have the button that says, 'Keep Harvard Open,'" says Mr. Abrams. "We opposed the strike, but we had lots of fun. So I've been a counterrevolutionary for a long time."

And since last July, when he was named assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, Mr. Abrams has become the most visible advocate of the Reagan administration's endeavor to counter the spread of Marxism-Leninism throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, recently emerging as the leading spokesman for the administration's effort to give \$100 million in economic and military aid to the rebels, known as Contras, who are resisting Sandinista rule in Nicaragua.

"One of the reasons for a distinctly more aggressive policy in Central America is the replacement of Tony Motley with Elliott Abrams," says Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy Richard N. Perle. With the support of the administration's key officials — support his predecessors did not have — Mr. Abrams has actually revamped the State Department's role in formulating the administration's Central American policies.

Mr. Perle first met Mr. Abrams more than 15 years ago. As an employee of Henry M. Jackson's Senate office, Mr. Perle attended an ADA convention in Washington. "I think I gave a talk," he recalls, "and I met this really quite remarkable young Harvard student-delegate who didn't sound at all like the others, expressing Jackson views."

"I went back to the office and told Scoop I had met this remarkable fellow, liberal on domestic issues but quite outspoken and tough on the Soviets."

"Richard Perle introduced me to Scoop in 1971," says Mr. Abrams, "and when I was in law school [at Harvard], I went to work for him as a volunteer in the '72 campaign. And I said to him at the time, 'If you run in '76, I want to work for you.'"

But first, a stint as a lawyer in New York. "I didn't like it at all," Mr. Abrams says. "So on my birthday in 1975, I decided that this is the year I should work for Scoop. I came down here — it's fairly typical — intending that if he didn't get elected president, I'd go back to New York. But by then, it was too late."

"When Pat [Moynihan, New York Democrat] got elected to the Senate, he hired me. I was with him 2½ years, until June 1979," as special counsel and later chief of staff. "Then I went back to law practice for about a year-and-a-half."

Rachel Abrams, his wife of six years, says she knew her husband would "eventually get back into politics."

"He was bored with law, demoralized. Among his many talents," she explains with wifely pride, speaking over the background sounds of their three young children, "is his ability to read and absorb material very,

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very quickly. They were complaining he wasn't logging enough hours. But he was just finishing his work quickly.

"The truth about Elliott is that he really isn't meant to work for other people. Of course," she adds, "working for George Shultz is different.

"For some, the money [in legal practice] is worth it. I mean, we're constantly broke," she says. "But if it were up to Elliott, he'd stay in government all his life.

"When the Reagan campaign came along, he jumped at it," she recalls. "He actually took a leave from his law firm. As soon as he went to work for the campaign, he became a very happy person."

"I couldn't change parties during the campaign," says Mr. Abrams with a smile, "because I was in Democrats for Reagan. But I did in '81.

"I'd have to look back, but my sense is that my foreign-policy views have been fairly conservative. On domestic policy, I've gotten more conservative. So it's ludicrous for someone like me to be in the Democratic Party. The decision to leave the party, and the decision to support Reagan, was no great anguished struggle for me."

According to Mrs. Abrams, the public eye hasn't wrought any personal changes in her husband.

"But once, after spending all day with the president," she says, "and then briefing the press, he came home and sort of said to me, 'Gee, isn't this amazing?' and I said, 'No, it's not. This is what you do.'"

Mr. Abrams is filling his third post as an assistant secretary of state. In January 1981, he became assistant secretary for International Organization Affairs. "It was a way in," says Mrs. Abrams, "but he enjoyed it."

Less than a year later, he became assistant secretary for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. But it is his present post that draws the most fire from critics, among them many of the lobbyists working to influence Central American policy.

Aryeh Neier, deputy chairman of the human-rights groups Americas Watch, has described him as "vitriolic and contentious." Others charge that he is "a prisoner of ideology," condemning him for what they con-

sider to be "an obsessive anti-communist."

Regularly attacked in the newspapers by such columnists as The Washington Post's Mary McGrory — who has called him, for example, "the angry assistant secretary of

state" ... "who has won favor with his superiors for representing things in El Salvador as better than they are and in Nicaragua as worse" — and The New York Times' Anthony Lewis — who has portrayed the official as denying information Mr. Lewis maintains he must know to be true — Mr. Abrams is not unaffected.

"What I think is remarkable about much of the argument is that it's an accusation of lying," says Mr. Abrams. "I mean, it's not an accusation of being deeply mistaken, it's an accusation that I know the truth and am deliberately lying. This is quite a serious charge.

"How do you argue with someone who says you're lying? He's speaking about one's mental state, engaging in character assassination of administration officials. But that's gratifying, in a perverse way, because it

means he's lost the intellectual debate.

"Elliott gets mad," says Mrs. Abrams, "but he also thinks it's an opportunity to respond, so actually it makes him roll up his sleeves. But he doesn't take it personally."

But press skepticism is another matter.

"I'm not astonished by it," he says, referring to the initial reluctance on the part of the press to believe that a Sandinista incursion into Honduras had occurred, following last month's defeat in the House of aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

"I'm somewhat offended, but you know, that's tough on me. But I'm saddened that it's still the case that so much of the press seems to put more credence in Managua than in Washington.

"The Sandinistas denied everything. And while they haven't said, 'Yes, we were lying,' the tune has changed and they acknowledge that they did invade Honduras. You'd think that this would destroy their credibility, but I'm not sure it has."

On the reports that the administration engaged in "arm twisting" to

force Honduras to ask publicly for \$20 million in emergency aid to respond to the incursion, Mr. Abrams is adamant.

"The president of Honduras called me Monday [March 24]. I spoke to him twice that day. And the fact is, [he] said, 'We have the largest incursion of Sandinista troops, and we need help.'

"I saw the NBC report that said we threatened to cut off aid if [the Hondurans] didn't request help. It's a lie. And anybody who says so is a liar."

After the NBC report aired, Mr. Abrams called the network to protest.

"They responded that they thought their sourcing was adequate. But you know, really what that says is that all of us involved in the White House, the State Department, the CIA, the Defense Department

are liars — every one of us, top to bottom. And secondly, that in 'threatening' Honduras with an aid cut-off, I think we'd probably be violating the law. So we're liars and criminals.

"If I were to go around lying to Chris Dodd and John Kerry and Mike Barnes on a day-to-day basis," he continues, referring to some congressional critics of administration policy with whom he is in touch, "they would know it, and they wouldn't speak to me. You can't do business that way in Washington."

How to do business in Washington?

In the weeks preceding the first round of the administration's battle for aid to the Nicaraguan resistance, Mr. Abrams found himself on the Hill more often than in Foggy Bottom, talking, talking and talking to members of Congress.

"You seek an appointment [with a House member]," explains Mr. Abrams, "and you go up and talk it through for an hour, trying to explain the administration's point of view in a way that has to be done face to face.

"They don't really want to talk to me," he says. "I mean, if you've made up your mind, there's no point in wasting your time. What I was doing was seeing members who were in doubt, and that was a lot of members, finding out what their concerns were — some from the left, some from the right — and trying to talk them through."

As Nicaraguan resistance Round 2 in the House approaches next week, Mr. Abrams is confident that Congress will agree on a sizable aid package.

"There's one major difference between the debate this spring and last spring," he says. "Now, the Sandinistas have no" — he searches for the word — "friends. I do not know of any senator who disagrees with the description of them as a band of Marxist-Leninist oppressors, except Sen. [Tom] Harkin [Iowa Democrat]."

"The evidence keeps rolling in, and each year the criticism of them increases, and the number of people willing to defend them decreases. That is a tremendous advance. You used to have to begin the debate by saying, 'Who are the Sandinistas, and what are they up to?'

"Now, you skip over that," he says. "We know who they are, we know what they're up to."

"The only issue is what's to be done about them."